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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development

The role of volunteerism in the promotion of social development

Note by the Secretary-General

1. In its decision 2000/238, the Economic and Social Council decided on the provisional agenda for the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-ninth session, which included, under the item entitled "Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development", consideration of two themes: (a) a priority theme of enhancing social protection and reducing vulnerability in a globalizing world; and (b) a sub-theme of the role of volunteerism in the promotion of social development.

2. In its resolution 1996/60, the Economic and Social Council had decided that the Commission for Social Development should establish the practice of opening its debates to experts and the main actors of civil society so as to enhance the exchange of information and experience, knowledge and understanding of social development. Further, in its resolution 1996/7, the Council reaffirmed the need for ensuring an effective partnership and cooperation between Governments and the relevant actors of civil society, the social partners and the major groups as defined in Agenda 21,[1] including non-governmental organizations and the private sector, in the implementation of and follow-up to the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development[2] and the Programme of Action of the World Summit,[3] and for ensuring their involvement in the planning, elaboration, implementation and evaluation of social policies at the national level.

3. Accordingly, in preparing for the thirty-ninth session of the Commission, and in response to the expressed intentions of the Council, the United Nations Volunteers organized a round table discussion of the sub-theme, hosted by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports of the Government of the Netherlands and held at The Hague on 2 and 3 November 2000. The discussion brought together a number of experts to

* E/CN.5/2001/1.

[1] *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992, Vol. I, Resolutions adopted by the Conference* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E. 93.I.8 and corrigenda), resolution 1, annex II.

[2] Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), Chap. I, resolution 1, annex I.

[3] Ibid., annex II.

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consider ways that volunteerism and voluntary action is manifested in different cultures.

4. The Economic and Social Council, in its resolution 2000/25, requested the Commission to make appropriate suggestions and recommendations to the General Assembly to further the contribution of volunteering to social development. It is expected that the Commission for Social Development will relate the question of volunteerism to efforts to eradicate poverty, to promote employment, to enhance social integration -- including empowering disadvantaged and vulnerable groups — and to increase awareness of major and rapid changes in many areas of life, including globalization, which are having a profound impact on societies everywhere. The attached report, prepared on the basis of the round table discussion, is submitted as background for the deliberations of the Commission.

Annex

Volunteering and social development: below the waterline of public visibility

Background

1. At the 81st plenary meeting of its fifty-fifth session, on 4 December 2000, the General Assembly adopted resolution 55/57, in which the Assembly requested the Commission for Social Development to make appropriate suggestions and recommendations to the General Assembly to further the contribution of volunteering to social development. In the same resolution, the Assembly decided that two plenary meetings of its fifty-sixth session, in 2001, would be devoted to volunteering and requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report for discussion on that occasion on ways Governments and the United Nations system could support volunteering. The thirty-ninth meeting of the Commission is expected to make an important contribution to that report.

2. Three substantive discussions have already taken place on the subject. The first, an expert working group meeting on volunteering and social development, was organized by the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) in November 1999 in New York to provide inputs for the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly[1] entitled "World Summit for Social Development and beyond: achieving social development for all in a globalizing world", held at Geneva in June 2000. The meeting, attended by a broad cross-section of international experts from government, civil society and the private sector, looked at definitions and benefits of volunteering in its various forms and made some preliminary proposals on how Governments may facilitate voluntary action.

3. Following on from this initiative, the twenty-fourth special session, agreed that the involvement of volunteers in social development should be promoted, inter alia, "by encouraging Governments to develop comprehensive strategies and programmes, by raising public awareness about the value and opportunities of volunteerism and by facilitating an enabling environment for individuals and other actors of civil society to engage in, and the public sector to support, voluntary activities".

4. The second discussion on volunteering and the role of the State was held in May 2000 in Hilversum, the Netherlands. Organized by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports of the Government of the Netherlands, the meeting was attended by government officials from 18 countries, who considered some of the elements needed to design effective government policies towards volunteering.

5. A third round table discussion was held in November 2000, also supported by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports. There, a group of experts from developing countries discussed ways in which volunteering and voluntary action are manifested in different cultures, and drew conclusions as to government action that could facilitate the growth of domestic volunteerism.

Introduction

6. Volunteering under its many names and guises is deeply embedded in long-established, ancient traditions of sharing in most cultures. Be it understood as mutual aid, helping the less fortunate, caring and service, or participation and campaigning, voluntary action is an expression of people's willingness and capacity to freely undertake to help others and improve society in the spirit of reciprocity. It brings significant benefits to individuals and communities and helps to nurture and sustain a richer social texture and a stronger sense of mutual trust and cohesion. Volunteering constitutes an enormous reservoir of skills, energy and local knowledge which can assist Governments in carrying out more targeted, efficient, participatory and transparent public programmes and policies. However, it is unusual for volunteering to be recognized as a strategic resource that can be positively influenced by public policy and even rarer for it to be factored into national and international development strategies.

7. The International Year of Volunteers (2001) offers a unique opportunity to make significant progress in bridging the gap between the

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Twenty-fourth Special Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/S-24/8/Rev.1), chap. 3.

acknowledgement of a long-standing tradition of voluntary action on the one hand, and a recognition of its potential as a major national asset for promoting social development, on the other. This calls for generating in all sectors of society — government, non-governmental organizations, business, media, the educational system and philanthropic organizations — a clearer awareness of the contribution of voluntary action as a valued component of social development. Once this recognition is clearly and unambiguously established, the way is clear for Governments, in consultation with all other partners in development, to come up with their own proposals and recommendations to foster and sustain the environment and organizational infrastructure needed to strengthen volunteerism within each national context.

8. The present paper is divided into three segments. The first discusses the spirit of volunteering, trying to recapture its human and community dimension, as well as its constituent and irreducible diversity. The second deals with the crucial challenge of linking voluntary action with social development strategies. The third explores possible avenues for government support of volunteering in the context of the unprecedented opportunities offered by the International Year.

Segment 1: The spirit of volunteerism

9. Volunteering is both a habit of the heart and a civic virtue. It is an action deeply rooted in the human spirit with a far-reaching social and cultural impact. Listening to, being concerned with and responding to the needs of others are evidence of the highest human motivation. Human beings help each other out of love and compassion. Yet, in its deepest spiritual dimension and symbolic meaning, volunteering is not simply something that we do for others. Our own values and humanity are at stake: we are what we give.

10. There is also an element of enlightened self-interest in all human behaviour. ("What I do for you today, you may do for me tomorrow.") Solidarity and self-interest coexist in peoples' minds when they give time. Moreover, ties of mutual trust and emotional connection give people a personal stake in the welfare of others. In this sense, volunteering is a freely assumed moral obligation. We help one another because we feel a sense of satisfaction in fulfilling a moral compulsion to do so. It is not an action imposed by an external authority. Volunteering as mutual aid and self-help is predicated on trustworthiness and expectations, that is, there is an underlying notion that the favour will be repaid. By caring and sharing, we become more fully human while, at the same time, enhancing the moral texture of our communities, the social fabric of our societies.

11. Nothing here is new. Caring and sharing have been a major component of human behaviour throughout civilization. Communities have always looked after the weakest and the most vulnerable of their members. Most religions emphasize the core values of caring for the poor, the sick and the destitute, for widows and orphans. Some extend these manifestations of compassion and sympathy beyond humans and into the whole of nature. These long-standing traditions, with roots that go back to time immemorial, are very much alive and vital in the contemporary world. The values of caring and sharing are not a nostalgic relic from the past, something doomed to become increasingly irrelevant as societies grow in complexity in the face of such challenges as urbanization, development and globalization. Caring and sharing are a necessity, not a charitable act.

12. To use contemporary words, participation and responsibility are at the very heart of active citizenship and good governance. Civic engagement, mutual trust, solidarity and reciprocity, grounded in social relations marked by shared understandings and a sense of common obligations, are mutually-reinforcing values. Data collected from both the industrialized and developing world indicate that traditions of trust and mutual help are not withering away. The values that these traditions encapsulate continue to make sense. In today's world, maybe more than ever before, it is this web of social connectedness that constitutes the most basic and irreplaceable safety net protecting the powerless from social atomization, despair, destitution, abuse and fear.

13. Although they endure and thrive, these networks of interaction are often not properly understood and valued and exist at the edges of organized society. As a result, mainstream development policies and programmes fail to build on an amazing wealth of human experience, made up of informal rules of solidarity, emotional bonds and social ties. The lack of awareness and knowledge about what happens below the waterline of public visibility inhibits Governments and other development actors from establishing partnerships and synergy with the very reservoirs of

energetic solidarity that enable and empower society. These attributes of social capital should be seen as an indispensable component of any strategy aimed at promoting social integration, poverty reduction and sustainable development.

14. People who trust and support each other tend to be more sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged, more tolerant of ethnic and religious diversity and more concerned with the well-being of unknown and distant peoples. The lessons of trust learned through voluntary action teach us to extend our localized moral commitments to people we will never personally know. For contemporary examples of this ethical phenomenon, one need look no farther than the massive movements to safeguard peace, human rights and the environment, and the recent global campaign against landmines. These realities reflect the rich interplay between local commitment and global outreach and highlight the enormous variety of voluntary initiatives.

15. On the other hand, the breakdown of basic community values, norms, and social relationships tends to be associated with the curtailment of voluntary action. In situations of social disintegration, people tend to take care of themselves rather than think of others. Levels of trust and social cohesiveness are greatly reduced. By the same token, volunteering can serve as a key source of reconciliation and reconstruction in divided societies, particularly where it cuts across ethnic, religious, age, income and gender lines. Restoring or building up trust should be a key policy measure in any post-conflict situation, as this will encourage solidarity and, as one expression of this, voluntary action.

16. Volunteering takes many shapes and forms. From one-on-one support at a personal level to community service, from mutual support in self-help groups to participation in broad-based movements and campaigns, voluntary action is as varied as the creativity of the volunteers, the nature of national settings and the breadth of problems. The common thread in this diversity is the fact that, in a world threatened by uncertainty and risk, volunteering provides a strong platform for reconnecting people who have become increasingly divided by gulfs of wealth, culture, religion, ethnicity, age and gender. In an age of instantaneous communication and global awareness, society's reliance on the healing power of inspiring, committed action for the public good is undiminished.

Segment 2: Harnessing the potential of voluntary action for social development

17. Governments are well positioned to play a leading role in devising innovative ways to articulate and harness voluntary action in support of their social policies and programmes. The challenge is not to replace the all-providing government paradigm with that of the self-reliant community, but rather to integrate them in a mutually reinforcing way. Neither Governments nor civil society can meet the challenges of equitable and sustainable development. They need to cooperate and complement each other.

18. In the search for a balance of duties and responsibilities, a crucial first step is to agree on some fundamental assumptions:

(a) There need be no contradiction between the duties of the State in providing public services and the responsibilities of the citizens to ensure that the benefits derived from those services is maximized;

(b) There need be no contradiction between "top-down" public policies and "bottom-up" community initiatives, between the offer of services and the strengthening of local voluntary initiatives;

(c) There need be no contradiction between, on the one hand, voluntary action as a form of social commitment and, on the other, productive employment as evidenced by the espousal of volunteering among their own memberships by organizations representing labour.

19. The next step is to gather and process data about the positive impact of social support networks and, where it exists, of their linkage and synergy with government actions. This can dispel fears and help to build and sustain new relationships of trust, dialogue and cooperation.

20. Reliance on voluntary action is in no way a rationale for government downsizing, nor is it an excuse to exploit volunteers' unpaid work. In welcoming and expanding its network of partners a Government does not curtail its legitimate role and responsibility. Partnership-building should not be a strategy dictated by a shortage of public funds, no matter how real this problem may be, if the hoped for result is the full collaboration on the part of all stakeholders. The argument in favour of citizen

participation is based on a win/win strategy, not a confrontational one or a second best option. Public/private partnerships are desirable insofar as they increase the efficiency and outreach of government programmes, as well as strengthening people's and community's trust in themselves and in their Government.

21. Trust between public and private partners must be nurtured. Alliances involving multiple partners will be best served if they are flexible, action-oriented and problem-solving, so as to build on their own success. Where synergies between the Government and the public are established, experience shows that voluntary action does not constitute a risk for Governments. On the contrary, volunteers are more likely to be partners than rivals or opponents, and the pool of skills and resources available to the State is increased, not reduced.

22. In many parts of the industrialized and developing world, for example, educational reform based on a public/private partnership has illustrated the benefits of opening up schools to the participation of parents and the community. Evaluations of national programmes indicate that when parents are involved in children's education, the school's performance markedly improves. Day-to-day management gains in efficiency; horizontal dialogue between teachers and parents becomes the rule rather than the exception; there is greater community support to at-risk students; and waste of resources and political patronage are drastically curtailed.

23. Similar positive correlations occur when people and communities are involved in the provision of basic health-care services. Social connectedness matters for the preservation of people's physical and emotional health. The provision of health services for the disabled, preventative outreach, and the physical condition of hospitals themselves has benefited from the systematic involvement of volunteers, in partnership with officialdom. Attitudes towards government health workers are often improved when local people's active support is sought. People's full involvement in safeguarding their own personal and collective well-being is a pre-condition of any successful primary health-care approach.

24. The widespread outpouring of voluntary commitment that occurs when societies are faced with unexpected crisis situations is being increasingly documented. Voluntary action is no less invaluable in times of more lasting and daunting national emergencies, such as the scourge of HIV/AIDS. The experience of countries as diverse as Brazil, Senegal, Thailand and Uganda demonstrates that the AIDS pandemic can only be addressed if the broadest partnership and synergy is established between government programmes and the often spontaneous initiatives of community associations, women's organizations, religious leaders, educators, health professionals, artists and entertainers, university, the media and the private business sector.

25. The message of this example, like many others, is that when voluntary action is taken account of and factored into development policies, these trends reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle of mutual support.

Segment 3: Strategies to strengthen volunteerism and the role of Governments

26. The World Bank *2000 World Development Report* corroborates the view that societal norms and networks are a key form of social capital and can be used as tools to move out of poverty. It is important, therefore, to work with and enhance these social networks by linking them to intermediary organizations, broader markets and public institutions. The report, building on the expert working group meeting and the Hilversum Seminar referred to at the outset of the present paper, considers conditions under which volunteerism may flourish. These include developing an overall, integrated national strategy for action by establishing an enabling fiscal and legislative framework, raising public awareness of the contribution of voluntary action to the general welfare, and promoting youth volunteering and private sector involvement.

27. Underlying these measures is the imperative of fully taking into account very different cultures and traditions when designing national strategies to support voluntary action.

28. Promoting voluntary action is one way in which Governments can increase the probability of success and cost-effectiveness of their national development initiatives. Unfortunately, voluntary action is all too often underrated as simply a contribution in kind. On the contrary, volunteer contributions can be critical in

maximizing the impact of physical and human capital on productivity and growth. The promotion of volunteering often involves the resurrection of dormant values that have always existed, be they expressed through tribal groups, village councils and mutual aid and self-help women's and youth associations, but which have been negatively affected by war, poverty or epidemics and, in some societies, by the decline of support systems such as the family and wider kinship networks and religious institutions. The impact of government investment in social capital can be at least as great, and possibly more sustainable, than other forms of investment.

29. One strategy in the promotion of voluntary action is the decentralization of resources and authority in order to bring service agencies closer to communities, enhance the latter's control over such services and increase public accountability in public sector programmes. Such policies open up space for parents' involvement in schools, facilitate community residents involvement in water supply, irrigation and forest management programmes, and promote more efficient income-generating opportunities for the poor. Development initiatives at a local level should systematically involve users who are willing to invest their own time — an investment that should be recognized and rewarded.

30. The organizational capacity of people, especially those living in poverty, can be enhanced through legal, fiscal and regulatory measures that remove barriers for local associational activities. The promotion of an environment supportive of local networks contributes significantly to the creation of entrepreneurial, rather than dependent, citizens. Key issues include the legal status and registration requirements of local voluntary organizations, funding mechanisms, and tenure rights over local resources. Governments may review regulations regarding qualifications for local peoples' involvement as volunteers in such areas as health and education, and revise laws pertaining to employment in the private sector to take into account the benefits of employee volunteering to the employee, company and society at large.

31. Another set of bottlenecks impeding organizational capacity are limited transport and communications infrastructures, which hinder the ability of people to organize. This is especially true of geographically dispersed populations and those living in poverty. A targeted programme of infrastructure improvements can overcome these constraints, augmenting social capital by means of an investment in physical infrastructure. The spread of new information technologies also has the potential to make major gains against this limitation.

32. Access to information is a vital element of any environment in which voluntary action can flourish. Being well informed of government policies and programmes allows people at the local level to feel more ownership of public services and to know where and how to get involved. Thus, they are more likely to complement government programmes through voluntary action. Networking information about other local initiatives and best practice is an equally crucial input, economizing on time and effort. Governments, universities and non-governmental organizations are well positioned to disseminate a new understanding of the value of synergy and partnership between the State and society.

33. Flexible feedback mechanisms of exchange and training can give new meaning to people's participation and to public programmes. By facilitating linkages among communities and between communities and the State, the Government can take the lead in building a framework of trust. Teaching government personnel the merits of voluntary action, which builds upon local traditions of solidarity, and using the media to provide information on such traditions where they have been severely diminished, would be helpful. Governments can also provide opportunities for management and technical training to people who wish to volunteer.

34. Another area for government action is the promotion of initiatives aimed at expanding the opportunities for volunteer contribution among excluded segments of the population. Given the sense of personal worth and the social utility that individuals and society gain from voluntary action, the right to volunteer should apply to all sectors of society. People with disabilities, older persons and refugees have immense amounts of skill and knowledge to contribute to their communities, and would be well served by the personal benefits of voluntary action. Voluntary action should be promoted and recognized within a holistic framework that incorporates volunteering and paid work as key ways in which citizens share their knowledge and skills with society. Again, new information technologies can open up many opportunities in this respect.

35. Governments can also play a key role in devising innovative ways of enhancing the participation of youth in civic life. The disaffection and despair felt by many young people in the industrialized and developing worlds, especially those living in poverty, threatens the very fabric of many societies. Experience shows that when youth are offered creative and meaningful opportunities to contribute to the improvement of their communities, they react very positively. Incorporating community service programmes into school curricula, provided the service opportunities are meaningful and regular, can have a real impact on the level of youth participation. Moreover, the impact is likely to have lasting results, given the fact that volunteering in one's youth is a strong predicator of volunteering later in life. Another promising strategy centres around the dissemination of new information technologies, that enable youth to communicate with one another and to discuss their values and culture, enhance their self esteem, sense of social responsibility and civic leadership.

36. Given the magnitude and diversity of voluntary action and its relative public invisibility, Governments could encourage and undertake research into the traditions of volunteering that are rooted in their national culture and their impact on contemporary society. Those results could then be disseminated through public, private and voluntary sectors, in schools and places of worship and at special periodic celebratory moments, such as the national day or International Volunteer Day, with the full involvement of the media. Such research may cover measurements of the contributions of voluntary action to society and the economy and could find its way into national development plans and national human development reports and also into reports that Governments will prepare on action taken with respect to the recommendations of the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly. This would help to forge a common sense of purpose between Governments and communities, between State and society, facilitating and reinforcing their interaction and cooperation as partners in development.

37. Volunteering is an important component of successful social development that can expand resources, solve problems and improve the quality of life for all. By playing a pro-active enabling role, Governments can positively affect levels of voluntary participation in national society. However, the reverse is also true. By not factoring volunteering into the design and implementation of social policy, Governments run the risk of overlooking an extraordinary national asset and unwittingly undermining the very social traditions that underpin civic engagement and bind people together in common pursuits.

38. A key goal of the International Year of Volunteers is to increase the visibility of volunteering and to identify ways in which voluntary action can be facilitated. Thus, it offers a unique opportunity to initiate discussions on the issues raised in the present paper at a national level. Equally important is the national infrastructure that is in place to implement concrete steps once agreement is reached on the course to be followed. At the beginning of the year, national International Year of Volunteers committees were formed in around 100 countries, either at the instigation of Governments or with their full involvement. While promoting and sustaining volunteering is a shared responsibility of all the sectors, Governments can seize this opportunity for action to explore, in consultation with all relevant partners, the ideas outlined in the present paper and to strengthen the special contribution that voluntary action already makes to the well-being of all the world's peoples.